

VIEWS & REVIEWS

MEDICAL CLASSICS

Rethinking Psychiatry

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Rethinking Psychiatry: From Cultural Category to Personal Experience

A book by Arthur Kleinman

First published 1988

The author of *Rethinking Psychiatry: From Cultural Category to Personal Experience*, Arthur Kleinman, is a psychiatrist and anthropologist at Harvard University. In this tome he uses his academic knowledge and experience to muse on the conflicts between his disciplines and between the medical and social sciences in general. More importantly, he considers what the subjects can gain from one another, and he gives his own ideas of how this could happen practically.

He compares the methods employed by academics in each discipline, exposing their biases. Anthropologists are inclined to see the differences between cultures and the idiosyncrasies in each one. Doctors are more likely to see similarities and to draw conclusions that they can generalise.

The book continues by exploring the findings of medical anthropologists, including the many examples of illness either being framed by the culture within which it is experienced or being entirely defined by that culture. One particularly provocative finding is that trance and possession states are almost ubiquitous in non-Western cultures and were so in the West before the modern age. In his interpretation of this, Kleinman quotes T S Eliot's observation that the West suffers from a "dissociation of sensibility"—that is, in our quest to understand ourselves through science we have separated our experience of life from our observation of that experience. This has affected Western consciousness such that it precludes, or

at least makes less likely, the experience of emotion through bodily metaphors such as trance.

There are many other fascinating discussions in this book, many based on Kleinman's own research. His lucid explanations and original interpretations focus on what he thought was lacking in clinical education and practice at the time. Mostly, this was a lack of interest in the effects of culture on the incidence and prevalence of disease and on the experience of illness. This absence meant that clinicians were at risk of failing to understand patients. Kleinman reflects powerfully on the role of the healer, compromised by medicine as he saw it. He discusses the importance of patients' desire to be heard, to be healed by "existential confession," and how the co-opting of an anthropological approach can help doctors.

Much has changed since then, in the discipline of cross-cultural psychiatry and in undergraduate medical education in general. The social sciences have been incorporated into the curriculums of most medical schools—yet they are still seen as soft topics. Kleinman's work remains vital in making the case for the value of the social sciences to medicine, academic and clinical. For those of us left nonplussed or uninspired by the basic sociology taught at university, this book will help justify and invigorate a renewed interest.

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